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Constructing the future: solidarity action in Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT

Hungarian solidarity action was organised in the second half of the 1980s to build an agricultural vocational school in Nicaragua. Even though Hungary and Nicaragua had special relations after the 1979 Sandinista revolution, the time of the construction calls the attention because it formed part of a period characterised by general disenchantment in solidarity actions towards the Third World as well as economic problems and the final years of socialism in Hungary. The motives and the evolution of the construction will be analysed providing an in-depth picture, with the aim of contributing to Cold War studies and investigations on knowledge exchange. The article principally relies on archival and press sources.

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Introduction

At the beginning of September 1986, 20-forint raffle tickets promising attractive prizes, including cars, holidays and a flat, became available to the general public in socialist Hungary. They formed part of the initiative organised by the Hungarian Young Communist League (Magyar Kommunista Ifjúsági Szövetség, KISZ) to raise money for the building of a vocational school in a small Nicaraguan town, near the Honduran border (Világ Ifjúsága 1986, 20). The construction in Chinandega was special in various ways. First of all, this solidarity action took place at a time when there tended to be a growing disillusionment towards these kinds of projects. Second, by starting in 1986 and finishing in 1988, this turned out to be the last considerable and successful international project of KISZ (Gózon 1992), for the organisation got dismantled in April 1989 as part of the political transition and democratisation in Hungary.

The construction of the school in Chinandega took place and thus needs to be studied in a Cold War framework, taking into account the opportunities and constraints of the bipolar system. Therefore, this article will begin with a brief overview on investigations about the relationship between the socialist bloc and the Global South, gradually narrowing down the focus to links between Hungary and Nicaragua. The analysis of the solidarity action is divided into two main parts, based upon the location of the principal events. The first part concentrates

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on the preparations that were made in Hungary, whereas the second part focuses on the school construction in Nicaragua. Besides geography, there is also a certain chronological logic behind this arrangement, as preparations either preceded or took place in a parallel way with the building activities. Research questions connected to the preparatory phase include: How did ordinary Hungarian citizens get information about the campaign? How could they get involved? How was fundraising organised? In what ways was it different from previous periods when trust in solidarity had been much higher? The second phase focuses on the construction part: the builders, the materials and the logistics. Last but not least, it will be analysed how this whole solidarity project fit into general Hungarian–Nicaraguan relations and what impact it might have had on their progress.

The investigation is based primarily on qualitative analysis of Hungarian press sources of the 1980s. These were complemented by archival material, kept among the documents of the Foreign Ministry (Külügyminisztérium, KÜM) in the Hungarian National Archive (Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Országos Levéltára, MNL OL).

Studies on East–South relations

Studies on bilateral relations between East (Central) European and Latin American countries grew considerably after the end of the Cold War as borders and research fields opened up. These investigations, however, tended to focus on time periods previous to the Cold War, partly because of the restricted availability of local Cold War archival material and partly due to the little attraction the period had for East European investigators immediately after the regime change. These constraints tended to dwindle for the twenty-first century. At the same time, due the high number of studies examining the role and relationship of the two superpowers, there surged a growing attention towards alternative ways to study the Cold War, by widening the range of examined actors. The investigation of the roles and actions between non-superpowers and the hegemony, and the relations among minor actors can in fact reveal behavioural norms and interaction patterns of the Cold War that have been little known, contributing to a better understanding of the international system of that period. An attractive possibility is to study the relationship between (countries of) the socialist bloc and the Third World, nowadays mostly referred to as the Global South. Some edited books – the result of the efforts of various authors – have been published recently (Mark 2020; Mark and Betts 2022; Roth-Ey 2023) providing a more comprehensive picture. Yet, due to the novelty of this field of research, case studies and investigations published in the form of individual articles, often elaborated from the perspective of particular countries, have been more common. Various focus on some aspects of international migration: the experience and movement of guest workers, students and experts. They include works providing a more general, sometimes comparative angle (Alamgir 2018, 2020; Apor 2017; Boušková 1998) and several in-depth studies concentrating on a specific group of workers, such as Cuban guest workers (Bortlová-Vondráková 2019; Gruner-Domic 1997; Pérez-López and Díaz-Briquets 1990; Szente-Varga 2020a; Szente-Varga and Bortlová-Vondráková 2021; Zalai 2010), Vietnamese guest workers (Alamgir 2014a, 2014b, 2017a, 2017b; Dennis 2007; Hardy 2002; Kolinsky 2005; Schwenkel 2015), Angolan and/or Mozambican guest workers (Rabenschlag 2015; Schenck 2016, 2018; van der Heyden, Semmler, and Straßburg 2014). Students' experience has also been examined (Burton 2019; Katsakioris 2021; Müller 2014) and there is a thrilling book on Czechoslovak experts who worked in the Hispanic World (Bortlová-Vondráková 2021).

Nonetheless, these groups have received less attention so far, compared to guest workers. These shorter or longer stays by guest workers, students and/or experts in the socialist bloc or in the Third World, coming from 'the other side', did not only entail the movement of humans, but also the flow of ideas, knowledge and experience (Stanek 2020). All this travelling of people and know-how is closely related to the scope of this article written on the construction of a vocational school in Chinandega, Nicaragua, specialised in agriculture.

Preparations

Background

The timing of the construction was very special because it coincided with a period characterised by growing pessimism with respect to the development possibilities of the Third World, in particular Africa and Latin America. 'In per capita terms, Latin America's gross domestic product fell by 8.3% between 1981 and 1989' (Smith and Green 2019, 475), accompanied by a serious foreign debt crisis. In the region the 1980s is often referred to as the "lost decade". African outlooks were even bleaker leading to expressions such as Afro-scepticism (Hyden 1996) and Afro-pessimism (Okumo 2001; Rieff 1998–1999; Schorr 2011), putting to manifest the failure of previous development models.¹ This inevitably led to questions on how to go on, what sort of alternatives would be feasible and why these regions were not able to progress in a way they were expected to. The answers could include external and internal reasons, the latter often being related to corruption, endemic poverty, violence, etc. In the extreme, it came to be doubted whether Africa and Latin America would be able to develop at all. Will the future be better for them than the past?

It seemed that there was not much point in sending aid since the planned outcomes have not been achieved. It could appear as a waste of time and money. This kind of deepening scepticism with respect to solidarity action, did not only affect the West, but also the socialist bloc. The experience with Cuba – as it will be explained in detail later on – was not completely satisfactory. It was one of the main reasons why socialist countries tended to be more cautious with Nicaragua. Another reason was their own unflattering economic situation.

Although Hungary in 1980 still overtook Portugal, Greece and all European socialist countries except for the GDR and Czechoslovakia with respect to the level of relative economic development, trends of economic growth were already unfavourable. Reasons included internal factors such as the long-lasting reluctance to introduce reforms and external ones, the most important being the 1973 oil crisis. Hungarian gross domestic product grew on average by 2.9% between 1976 and 1980, by only 1.6% between 1981 and 1985, and was stagnating in the second half of the decade (0.3%, 1986–1990). To make things worse, Hungary had accumulated the highest foreign debt per capita among socialist bloc countries by the end of the 1980s (Romsics 1999, 447–448, 454).

Amidst economic problems, the Hungarian government had to reconcile two completely different goals. On one hand maintain the already achieved level of living standards at home (one of the main pillars of the system's legitimacy), therefore spend as little as possible on other fields, including solidarity actions abroad. On the other hand, catch up and follow suit with other socialist countries helping Nicaragua, demonstrating commitment to socialist ideals. The construction of a school; an attractive and at the same time economical project tried to fulfil both objectives. Yet the government was reluctant to take money directly from

the budget. Therefore, it needed to convince its citizens to devote their own time, own labour force and money to the cause of constructing a vocational school in Chinandega.

Communication and persuasion

Communication was crucial with respect to carrying out the solidarity action. It was mostly done with the help of the Hungarian Young Communist League – often in an interpersonal way – and via the Hungarian media. The purposes included informing the Hungarian public about the situation in Nicaragua, convincing them about the importance of the project and motivating them to participate to create the necessary financial background. Providing news on the current state of the project (how well fundraising and school construction were going) aimed to further disseminate the idea of the solidarity action and engage an increasing number of people while the construction was going on. At the same time, it was also a form of feedback for those who had already contributed that they had made the correct choice. Some (outstanding) contributions were rewarded. For example, the group which prepared the furniture of the Hungarian brigade got a 30-thousand-forint remuneration from the provincial KISZ committee (Zalai Hírlap 1988, 16).

It is possible to read contemporary Hungarian news from the 1980s related to the solidarity action via the Arcanum digital periodical database. The tendency is clear: lots of attention at the beginning of the project which dwindled away in the years to come. The most active journals were the following: the weekly *Magyar Ifjúság* (central organ of KISZ) and dailies of national coverage – *Népszabadság* (central organ of Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, MSZMP), *Magyar Nemzet* (paper of the Patriotic People's Front, Hazafias Népfront) and *Népszava* (central organ of Hungarian trade unions). Some dailies of regional outreach, papers of MSZMP county committees such as *Hajdú-Bihari Napló*, *Zalai Hírlap*, *Csongrád Megyei Hírlap* and *Vas Népe* also published regularly on the school construction. Altogether, more than 20 journals had related articles, focusing mostly on the fundraising activity and/or the construction project in Nicaragua.

Having a rewarding experience in the school construction project could re-enforce engagement with it and with similar future solidarity actions, as well as boost socialist morale. 'Nicaragua means the same to many young people today as Vietnam did some time ago' (*Magyar Ifjúság* 1986, 6). Thus, the project had a practical aim (providing Nicaragua with a school) and a didactic one for domestic purposes (reenforcing socialist values). No one knew at that time, that the Chinandega school will in fact be the last solidarity action carried out by KISZ, soon to be dismantled by the regime change. The detailed articles in the Hungarian press could not rescue the trust in the Kádár regime and the principles it was supposed to represent. Yet they do allow us a glance at the process of the school building itself, in other words, how the solidarity action was organised and completed.

Fundraising

Fundraising had several purposes, both internal and external. First of all, it spared the Hungarian government from having to spend directly, as the money was to be paid by ordinary Hungarian citizens. Fundraising also meant the involvement of a group of people behind one project. It activated people and it provided a common denominator. It also implied that

Hungarian population got information on Nicaragua and the events that were going on in that Central American country. Fundraising was also meant to contribute to preserving and strengthening the revolutionary spirit of the Hungarian population. Externally, Hungary could demonstrate in front of the world that it was living up to the standards of socialist countries, taking the principle of solidarity seriously. The construction of the school could also improve relations with Nicaragua and possibly increase the international visibility of Hungary.

The principal way of collecting money was via a raffle. Three million raffle tickets were printed (Vas Népe 1986a, 8). They cost 20 forints each and could be bought from 7 September 1986 from KISZ activists, university and college students. They consisted of a combination of numbers and at least one letter. These could only be seen when the tickets were open, as they were sold in envelopes. There were various ways to win to make the raffle more attractive. Some tickets were to take part in the public televised draw for the main prizes, which included a 53-square-metre condominium, a Volkswagen Golf and a Lada 1300 car, a chalet, and holidays abroad (Kállai 1986, 2). The latter were a Leningrad-Tallin trip for two people, a seaside trip (Sochi) for two people and a trip to Cuba (one person) (Népszabadság 1987a, 8). Another possibility was to get a smaller, yet still attractive prize, which could be collected at the Divatcsarnok² immediately, such as a building material voucher for 200 000 forints, a voucher for buying furniture (50 000 forints), video recorders, colour TVs, freezers, Adidas sports clothes,³ shoes, kayaks, skis, or a holiday at Lake Balaton (Kállai 1986, 2). Unwinnable tickets could be sent to a special address, giving their owners a second chance. A draw was organised every fortnight, forming part of the popular TV program *Ablak* (Hajdú-Bihari Napló 1986a, 4).

The solidarity action for Nicaragua had its own brand: NIC Hungary, announced at the National Congress of the Hungarian Young Communist League. Popular and shortage articles such as Rotring-type pencils, non-drying marker pens and T-shirts were sold under this brand.

It might seem strange at first glance, but books were also published to raise money. Obviously, the topics had to be very attractive. The first one *Mundial zárt kapuk mögött* (World Cup behind closed doors) was an account of the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. It had a special focus on the participation of the Hungarian national team, which suffered an unexpected and shattering defeat (6:0) from the Soviet Union. The book was published immediately after the events, still in 1986, first in 120,000 copies (Hajdú-Bihari Napló 1986b), and then in another 50,000 copies (Képes 7 1986, 58), and the Central Committee of the Hungarian Young Communist League (KISZ KB) was indicated as the publisher. The book was disseminated and could be bought at the local KISZ organisations (not in bookshops) for 55 forints (Veszprémi Napló 1986, 7). Another book was written by Antal Sólyom,⁴ under the title *Nicaragua*. It was an account of the historic, political, social and economic processes of the Central American country (Csongrád Megyei Hírlap 1987, 8). Not a potential bestseller, but a work that KISZ judged essential to inform the Hungarian population on the country the solidarity action was targeting. In that case, the publisher was already the NIC Organisational Office, which also featured on the works edited in 1987. One was a book on ratlines to South America and how some of the Nazi war criminals were caught and brought to justice later. The title is rather journalistic, openly designed to attract readers: *A terrorkígyó méregfoga* (The venomous tooth of the snake of terror). The other book was of a completely different genre. It was the story of a brand-new Hungarian pop band, Z'Zi Labor, formed in the middle of the 1980s (Janicsák 1987). They got first prize at the Interpop Festival in 1986. The same year they could perform in the opening act of the Queen concert in Budapest, in front of 70,000 people in the People's Stadium. It is known that the sales of the book on Z'Zi Labor were expected to contribute up

to 2 million forints to the construction (Veszprémi Napló 1987, 5). Besides the books, a puzzle magazine (*Kettesben*) was also published by the NIC Organisational Office. 99+1 prizes were raffled among successful puzzle solvers, for example shopping vouchers and motors, the main prize being a Lada car. Trusting in the attractiveness of the game, the Office issued the magazine in 350,000 copies (Vas Népe 1987, 8; Vasárnapi Hírek 1987, 2).

The Central Committee of KISZ urged its local units to join the solidarity action for Nicaragua. On one hand support the central activities by disseminating in general the importance of the solidarity action, making people aware of the school construction project, and of course selling the raffle tickets, books, NIC articles – for some commission! –, etc., to raise money. On the other hand, these local organisations were also expected to come up with their own ideas how they could contribute. The way to do it was up to their decision. Trying to convince people to donate some of their savings and pay them to a bank account no longer promised to be effective, due to growing inflation, worsening economic situation and an increasing disenchantment from the system. Some local units therefore decided for extra work, for example cleaning the cultural centres of a given area and offering some of the revenue thus obtained (Kisalföld 1986, 4). Things have already been changing in Hungary. The fact that the Queen could come to have a concert was part of a cultural opening, done to a great extent in order to compensate for the economic failures and preserve the support of the population. Doing new things in fact did not only become acceptable, but up to a certain point fashionable in the wake of changes introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union.

This solidarity action towards Nicaragua was financed both by novel means (elaborating a brand, paying commission to people selling NIC Hungary products) and traditional ones. The previous meant, 'more efficient, business-like, entrepreneurial solutions' (Fejér Megyei Hírlap 1986, 3), where participants could obtain some material benefits, though most of the money would go to the school construction. The latter, traditional ways still expected people to behave in an altruistic way and participate in the solidarity action based on their socialist convictions, without material incentives. These could include donations to local KISZ committees (money and/or items) and the Hungarian Solidarity Committee (*Magyar Szolidaritási Bizottság*) as well as special, low-priced or gratis products by companies and associations elaborated via (unpaid) voluntary work. For example, the KISZ committee of Hajdúsági Iparművek – a firm specialised in domestic machines – donated two washing machines, two spin dryers and two hot water tanks for the Nicaraguan cause, assembled by socialist brigades (Hajdú-Bihari Napló 1986c, 8). Hungarian artisans sewed school uniforms for Nicaraguan students in social work (Népszabadság 1987b, 4). A group of young workers of Zala Bútorgyár (furniture company) elaborated the pieces of furniture for the accommodation of the Hungarian construction brigade in Nicaragua, in the framework of voluntary work (Zalai Hírlap 1988, 16).

Solidarity events were also organised – usually with the participation of a Nicaraguan guest – where money (either previously collected on a bank account or raised during the solidarity event which could include some theatre or other performance) was given to the Central American partner. Examples include the solidarity day of the Police Officers' Training School in Szombathely, Western Hungary, held on 20 October 1986. 5000 forints and a special gift, a floor vase with the emblem of the Hungarian police school was offered for the educational facility to be built (Vas Népe 1986b, 8).

Immediately after the inauguration of the school in Chinandega, another solidarity day was organised in Szombathely in the police training school, on 3 March 1988, with the participation of various Nicaraguan guests, including a member of the Nicaraguan embassy and Nicaraguan teachers being trained in Hungary to work in Chinandega. First secretary Manuel Lazama Chávez thanked participants for their help in the project and assured them that the vase donated in 1986 was already in Nicaragua in the newly constructed school (Magyar Rendőr 1988, 5). That event in Szombathely was a classic example of feedback: a kind of reconnection with the solidarity actions, to assure participants that their donations were worthwhile, served a good cause and the whole project was a success.

The construction

Immediate antecedents

The immediate antecedents of the construction can be traced back to 1984. That was the time when architect Gábor Reischl⁵ was travelling back from Cambodia where an orphanage had been completed upon his plans as part of a United Nations project, via the work of the construction team of the Hungarian Young Communist League. The orphanage, located in Kompong Kantuot, was built on a territory of 22 hectares and consisted of various units including a kindergarten, school, workshops, medical centre, laundry, kitchen, canteen and a theatre (MTVA Archívum 1983). It was a successful project and Reischl was ready to repeat the experience: he wanted to design something for Nicaragua. His ambitions coincided with the plans of the Hungarian leadership.

The Hungarian government needed to prove its commitment behind the Sandinista government and its loyalty to the foreign policy priorities set by the Soviet Union, especially so, as it had been lagging behind in support offered to the Central American country. Nicaragua got 24.2% of its loans and lines of credit, contracted between July 1979 and June 1984, from the socialist countries: altogether 605.6 million USD. The Soviet Union contributed 262.2 M; GDR: 140 M; Bulgaria: 60 M; Cuba: 53,4 M; Czechoslovakia: 30 M, Yugoslavia: 25 M, and Hungary: 5 M(!) (Berrios 1985, 126). The quantity that corresponded to Hungary was by far the smallest. Although Hungarian authorities were aware that with the deterioration of the internal situation Nicaraguan demands for help increased from 1984, the Kádár government was still reluctant to spend. 'From an economic point of view, it is not recommended to meet Nicaragua's needs. Nicaragua openly reveals that, in the spirit of revolutionary solidarity, it expects free aid and preferential treatment from the member countries of the COMECON,⁶ regardless of world market conditions. It projects the horizon for the return of our aid to the 1990s' (KÜM k - Nicaragua - IV 1984). It was preferred to look for cost-efficient ways to improve relations.

In February 1986 Reischl travelled to the Central American country, carrying with himself the plans he had already made for a boarding school specialised in agriculture. The aim of his visit was to adjust his plans to the concrete physical environment of the site. Only a couple of months later, in May 1986 the eleventh congress of the Hungarian Young Communist League passed the resolution to offer the construction of the boarding school. Soon László Szűcs, head of the construction office of the Central Committee of KISZ and engineer Géza Fonyó travelled to Nicaragua and spent there three weeks to make the last preparations (Világ Ifjúsága 1986, 20). The dispatchment of the construction team still took place during the course of 1986.

The team

First a team of six workers and an interpreter travelled to Nicaragua in October. A couple of months later they were followed by the rest of the brigade. The construction team consisted of 13 Hungarians on average (Magyar Ifjúság 1988a, 4), from different professions (Table 1). They were helped by 30–40 local workers (Világ Ifjúsága 1986, 20). Several people in the Hungarian brigade had already known each other, as some had worked together at Usztylilmszk in Siberia to build a wood and pulp combine in the second half of the 1970s, participated in the 1980s at the construction of the nuclear power plant in Paks, Hungary and/or at the building of the previously mentioned orphanage in Cambodia. Most of them had had foreign work experience and were expected to be able to work under adverse conditions in several professions. The brigade also had a cook and a doctor, the latter being the eldest member of the group, aged 45.

Table 1. List of brigade members (based on Hungarian press).

Surname	First name	Occupation	City of residence in Hungary	Age	Additional data
dr. Antalics	Mihály	physician, general practitioner	Esztergom	45	1941–2011. Company doctor in Libya (1981–85). General practitioner in the city of Esztergom; prominent local politician after the regime change, founding member of the local unit of the Conservative MDF party (Mátételki 1985, 17; Osvai 2016).
Benczik	Zoltán	cook			Worked in Hotel Novotel in Budapest.
Csordás	Károly	steel structure locksmith			
Dobó	Tibor	steward	Eger		Worked in Cambodia. Employed by the company Lenin Tsz in the city of Hatvan (Benda 1987, 25).
Fekete	János	roofer		33	
Fonyó	Géza	engineer, leader of the brigade			Worked in Cambodia.
Knyihár	János	mason			Worked in Cambodia. Employed by the company Békécsaba és Környéke Agráripari Egyesülés (Ifjúsági Magazin 1986, 8).
Mihalics	Károly	carpenter, steel structure locksmith			Got married and settled in Nicaragua.
Nagy	László	electrician	Hajdúnánás	27	Got married and settled in Nicaragua, had a restaurant <i>Rancho húngaro</i> , later a small stationary.
Papp	Erika	interpreter			Present at the construction in the first two months only (A jövő mérnöke 1987, 3).
Sípos	Lajos	mason			Worked in Cambodia (Világ Ifjúsága 1984, 16).
Szűcs	István	foreman	Mosonmagyaróvár	37	Worked in Usztylilmszk and Cambodia.
Tóth	László	painter	Gyöngyösoroszi	30	

Source of data (if not indicated otherwise): Nagy 1988, 4; Fonyó 2019.

Materials

Materials for the construction were shipped from Belgium (Zeebrugge) to Nicaragua (Corinto) on Soviet ships for a special price. The reason does not only have to do with solidarity, it is also important to take into account that the Nicaraguan banana export was transported by the Soviets from Central America to Europe and the way back ships had little cargo. Thus, it was not a problem to transport the Hungarian items. Materials from the port of Corinto were moved to Chinandega by land transport. The containers had Russian inscriptions, that is why locals tended to think – especially at the beginning – that it was a Russian project (Fonyó 2019, 122). The containers of the first shipment (26 small and 11 big ones with a total of 600 m³ of goods) comprised a microbus, a car, cement, Betonúp S-III lightweight building elements of the West-Hungarian Agro-industrial Combine (Nyugat-Magyarországi Fagazdasági Kombinát), tools, food and some personal items (Ifjúsági Magazin 1986, 8). It seems the construction brigade was preparing for self-sufficiency in civil war-torn Nicaragua.

Modified plans

The original idea on building a clinic for hearing impaired patients (Magyar Ifjúság 1988a, 4) was discarded for a school specialised in agricultural studies, so that the Hungarian partner does not only construct the building, but it can also share its specialised knowledge on agriculture. Architect Gábor Reischl made plans for 160 students, however, the Nicaraguan partner had more ambitious plans and wanted to include 600 students. Reischl modified his plans accordingly and designed a building with three construction phases: phase A for 160 students, phase B for 240 and phase C for another 200 students, altogether 600. The building was planned to be operational after phase A, allowing for expansion while already functioning. A tenth of the territory of the Hacienda San Antonio Ameya was designated for the construction, being originally an agricultural land, and where upon their arrival, Hungarian constructors still found growing cotton (Benda 1987, 25).

The inauguration of the school was originally set for 19 July 1987, the 8th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. This deadline was very tight, taking into account that the first group of the Hungarian construction brigade arrived in Nicaragua in October 1986. They would have had less than a year to complete the project. Consequently, it was quite likely from the beginning that the inauguration would need to be postponed.

Tensions

The press coverage, the fundraising, as well as the final and weekly raffles transmitted by state television made the project relatively well-known in Hungary. Average Hungarian citizens could have the impression that things were going on the right track: money was being raised, the building of the school had already started; Hungarian-Nicaraguan relations were excellent and bilateral cooperation was getting stronger. However, the Nicaraguan point of view was quite different. At the 4th COMECON-Nicaragua joint commission meeting, in autumn 1987, 'President Daniel Ortega, at the reception for the heads of delegations, and Minister of Foreign Economic Cooperation Henry Ruiz, in the plenary session, in a sign of their position that Hungary is supporting Nicaragua below its means, mentioned Hungarian

aid conspicuously and consistently in the last place when assessing the help of the socialist countries' (KÜM j - Nicaragua - IV 1987). The Hungarian delegation, feeling highly uncomfortable, sent home a ciphered telegram, describing the events and asking for instructions.

The main reasons for these tensions were complex. The most important factor was the unwillingness of the Hungarian government to support substantially the Sandinista regime in a financial way. Perceptions and expectations on both sides, including the overestimation of Hungarian capacities by the Nicaraguan partner could also play a part.

Nicaraguan leaders travelled frequently to the socialist bloc. Some of these trips included Hungary. For example, Daniel Ortega had visits in 1984 and 1985. Visitors were generally shown the newest factories and products, the best parts of the capital city and the countryside. Therefore, they could have the mistaken impression that the whole of Hungary was like that. Consequently, they tended to have an exaggerated idea of the level of development and the economic possibilities of the country and found Hungarian support for Nicaragua unsatisfactory.

The other side of the coin is that the main objective of Hungarian foreign policy in Latin America has traditionally been trade, especially, exports. The Kádár government wanted to have commercial relations with the region, trade with capitalist countries, as it would allow Hungary to behave according to capitalist rules; go for profit and try to get some hard currency which the government badly needed. Therefore, it would have preferred to base relations with Latin America on the commercial interests of Hungary instead of political-ideological considerations. The problem with the latter category was that instead of financial benefits, it implied costs.

Hungary already had special relations with Cuba, based on ideological grounds. Although it was not among the socialist countries which helped the island the most, it did send some support, consequently it was a relationship which resulted in expenses for the Hungarian side. The costs and the fact that Cuba did not develop the way the socialist bloc desired, led to disenchantment, especially on behalf of the countries that sent a lot of support, such as the Soviet Union, East Germany and Czechoslovakia (Bortlová 2011). They in fact tried to pressurise the Cuban government to have a say and supervise how aid was used, but Fidel Castro firmly refused this as an attempt of meddling into Cuban internal affairs (Szente-Varga 2005, 362–363; 2008, 1–21). Hungary was neither among the countries that supported Cuba the most, nor among the ones that tried to insert influence. Thus Cuban-Hungarian relations were good in general, but of course Hungarian leadership was aware of the tensions and challenges that existed. The unsatisfactory experience in Cuba affected the behaviour of the socialist camp in Nicaragua (Opatrný 2013, 30). An important change can be noticed in case of Czechoslovakia, one of the countries that supported Cuba most enthusiastically and Nicaragua, rather modestly (Szente-Varga 2020b, 13).

In case of Nicaragua, the Hungarian government was worried about costs from the beginning. It did not want a second Cuba, not only because of the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph, but also because of the economic problems Hungary was facing. Closely related to the latter, 'in 1980 the unified system of foreign assistance was created, that is, the donations to the expense of their own financial limits of the individual ministries and state organs and professional (National Council of Trade Unions) and social organizations (Solidarity Committee, National Peace Council, Patriotic People's Front, etc.) were regulated (preliminary approval was a condition). According to the explanation of the order, the possibilities of Hungarian economy did not allow further sacrifices' (Dömény 2001).

For long years, János Kádár anchored his legitimacy to full employment and increasing standards of living. However, national economic output no longer proved enough to cover costs. Instead of structural changes, the government relied more and more on loans. The foreign debt of the country was 0.8 billion in 1970, 9.1 billion in 1980 and more than 20 billion at the end of the decade (Perczel 2003, 115; Romsics 1999, 451, 454). Loans were not only spent on new investments but also on unprofitable companies, providing relatively good living conditions, and from 1978, on repaying interests of previous loans. By the next decade a complex debt and economic crisis became inevitable, resulting in dwindling trust in the Kádár system.

This change is palpable via the public opinion polls conducted by the state agency *Tömegkommunikációs Kutatóközpont* (Centre of Investigation on Mass Communication), renamed in 1988 as *Magyar Közvéleménykutató Intézet* (Hungarian Public Opinion Research Institute). The opinion of those questioned in 1981 and in 1988 turned out to be radically different on the situation in Hungary vis-a-vis the West. The percentages show those who opined that things were better in Hungary. In 1981, 98% answered that the chances of bringing up children in a decent way are better in Hungary compared to the West. In 1988 only 42% were of the same opinion. Other fields also displayed significant drops, such as the protection of the interests of the workers (from 93% in 1981 to 46% in 1988), chances to acquire a flat (from 63% to 16%), material well-being (from 46% to 10%), etc. Yet the biggest change shown by the survey was in the stability of the value of the Hungarian currency. Those who believed Hungary was better off, dropped from 66% to 6% in less than a decade (Nagy 1989, 55).⁷ An increasing number of people got disillusioned from the system they used to support.

By showing the best and newest, the Hungarian partner tried to impress the Nicaraguans and make them admire Hungarian results as well as socialism in general. Creating a good impression also served to promote the socialist system, making it more attractive for Nicaraguans, and via their contacts, also for Latin Americans. However, while the Hungarian authorities tried to prove that the system was viable and desirable, it no longer functioned properly in Hungary and was losing local support. Nicaraguans up to a certain point could have been aware that the situation was not as rosy as painted by their partners, by using alternative ways to get information. However, they were in great need for aid and support in general, and in order to get these, they needed powerful friends. Their survival depended up to a great extent on the socialist world. They needed it strong/strong enough to help, and this could influence their perception of the related countries.⁸

Hungarian leadership was both unwilling and unable to play the role Central American politicians would have expected from it. In fact, by stating that Nicaraguans overestimated Hungarian possibilities, and they were asking for too much, some responsibility could be taken off the shoulders of the government. 'A false image of the Nicaraguan leadership has been formed about Hungary, and that is why they did not appreciate our help properly' (KÜM j - Nicaragua - IV 1987). From the official Hungarian point of view, the country helped Nicaragua 'enough'. According to a summary elaborated at the end of the decade:

In 1981-87, Hungary provided free aid to Nicaragua totalling some 486 million forints in the form of medicines, medical equipment, foodstuffs, clothing, special products, etc., as well as technical and scientific cooperation. In addition, in 1985 we supplied 30,000 tonnes, in 1986 50,000 tonnes and in 1987 10,000 tonnes of crude oil, also as free aid, worth about 610 million forints. Therefore, the total amount of free aid exceeded one billion forints, which proves that Nicaragua received the most aid from our country among the socialist-oriented developing countries. (KÜM k - Nicaragua - IV 1989)

This, however, would not have satisfied the Nicaraguan side. The answer for the ciphered telegram – sent upon the embarrassing COMECON event – that Hungarian delegates might reveal some of the real data corresponding to the country's economy, would have also fallen short of Nicaraguan expectations. The Hungarian side needed to do something (physically) to prove its good intentions and concern. It is possibly no coincidence that the technical inauguration of the school in Chinandega took place only a few weeks after the November COMECON meeting.

Completion of the project

The technical inauguration – the handing over of the unfurnished building – was held on 10 December 1987. A Hungarian delegation travelled to Nicaragua to participate in the event, led by the Secretary of the Central Committee of KISZ, Sándor Szórádi. The building was handed over to the Nicaraguan partner, represented by the deputy minister of education, Jaime Herrera. This first or technical inauguration had very little and rather late echo in Hungarian press. The magazine *Magyar Ifjúság* in fact published a 1-page article, but only in January 1988 (Magyar Ifjúság 1988a, 4). Thus, the most detailed account of the event can be found in the archive, in form of the summary sent by the Hungarian ambassador in Managua (KÚM k - Nicaragua - IV 1988). Little and late repercussion in the Hungarian media might imply that the inauguration was targeting Nicaragua more than Hungary, and that it was organised in a rush. December was not contemplated in the original plans as a possible deadline and the choice is rather strange taking into account that the real, that is second inauguration, followed very soon, 1 March 1988. Another Hungarian delegation visited Nicaragua for that occasion, led by Lajos Gubcsi, member of the Central Committee of KISZ and chief editor of the youth magazine and central paper of KISZ: *Magyar Ifjúság*. There was more and more timely press coverage (Magyar Hírlap 1988, 7; Magyar Nemzet 1988, 3; Magyar Ifjúság 1988b, 3).

Although teaching began in the school 1 March 1988, this did not mean the end of the project. The Hungarian side had assumed responsibility for the teaching material, the curricula and the training of the teaching staff. These were still in progress (Világ Ifjúsága 1988, 16). Some of the teachers studied in Hungary – in Hungarian! – in Vép at the Agricultural Vocational Training and Further Training Institute (Vas Népe 1988a, 8), including director Roger Picado and vice-director Mayra Gallo (Vas Népe 1988b, 2). Course books and teaching material in general were promised to be ready by the end of 1988. They were prepared in Hungarian, translated to Spanish, printed in Hungary, and planned to be shipped to Nicaragua (Magyar Ifjúság 1988a, 4).

Endeavours to transmit Hungarian agricultural know-how to Latin America had their antecedents. For example, in 1977 the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture and Food signed a cooperation agreement with its Mexican counterpart on agriculture and forestry. The aims included exchange of improved species and production technologies. Two years later the Hungarian firm Agrober opened a pilot farm in Jocotepec, Jalisco to teach locals how to grow corn (their indigenous crop!) in a more efficient way (KÚM j - Mexikó - IV 1981; Szente-Varga and Sánchez Andrés 2022, 85–86). The project in Mexico collapsed within two years, yet this failure did not make the Hungarian partner shy away from new attempts. Trying to teach Nicaraguans about agricultural methods can be considered even more peculiar, taking into account that one of their principal exports to the socialist world was bananas, and in general huge differences existed between Hungary and Nicaragua with respect to climate, flora and fauna.

By the end of the 1980s a kind of ‘Hungarian outpost’ was formed in Chinandega. A school which was not only physically constructed of and furnished with Hungarian materials and items, but which was also planned to operate on Hungarian agricultural know-how. Constant contact and feedback would have been needed but these ties were suddenly cut short, resulting in unexpected difficulties.

Conclusions

The project left an important impact on some individual lives, for example three members of the Hungarian construction team decided not to return, two forming a family and settling permanently in Nicaragua. On interstate level, however, the school building did not influence general Nicaraguan-Hungarian ties in a significant way. Although original Hungarian plans could include the goal of improving relations – getting special importance after the uneasy 1987 COMECON meeting –, this improvement did not take place. The completion of the building almost coincided in time with the end of the Cold War and the special Hungarian–Nicaraguan relationship was only to function if kept together by the will of a hegemon/superpower. The end of the bipolar system and the 1990 elections brought about new options both for Nicaragua and Hungary. There was more freedom of action, which tended to couple with the abandonment of previous, politically and ideologically based contacts and priorities. Hungarian foreign policy turned its attention towards Europe, relegating Latin America to the background. What used to be obligatory, became a nuisance. Hungary closed its embassy in Managua in 1990, lingering on in Central America by moving it to San José, Costa Rica until 1993, when closing it definitely.⁹ The Chinandega vocational school had to cope on its own.

The school building is hardly remembered now. The Hungarian Young Communist League, which organised the solidarity action no longer exists and its actions are little researched as they formed integral part of the Kádár system. Besides, approximately 35 years have passed since the construction, a period characterised by a very low level of bilateral Hungarian-Nicaraguan relations. The last time a Hungarian foreign minister visited Nicaragua was in 1986, when Péter Várkonyi went on a three-country trip in Latin America, including Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua.

Interestingly, the 2020s might bring about a change. Péter Szijjártó, minister of foreign affairs announced the donation of 304,000 doses of Pfizer/Comirnaty vaccines to Nicaragua in January 2023 (MTI 2023). This shift in the attention of Hungarian foreign policy could be linked to the Southern opening program, launched in 2015 to re-mend ties with the Global South as well as to the shrinking margins of manoeuvre of the Hungarian government in Europe.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank Réka Krizmanics for her insightful comments.
2. First iconic modern great store of the capital city, created in 1911, remodelled after WW2.
3. Hungarian sportsmen used Adidas shoes and / or clothes for decades (Rome 1960 Summer Olympics, Munich 1972 Summer Olympics, Seoul 1988 Summer Olympics, etc.), contributing to the popularity of the brand in the country. Nonetheless, the much-desired Adidas items were inaccessible for most Hungarians, until the opening of the first Adidas store in the capital, Budapest in February 1987 (Tóth 2020).
4. Member of the Hungarian Foreign Service. He worked in Havana, Bogota and Mexico City in the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. Political staff member of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Central Committee of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party at the time of writing the book. Later, at the end of the 1980s he was ambassador of Hungary in Mexico, accredited also to Honduras and Jamaica (Baráth and Gecsényi 2015).
5. 1948-2008. On his life and work, see Borbás (2014) and Farkas (2020).
6. Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. Economic organization of the socialist countries (1949-1991).
7. Inflation exceeded 15% in 1988 and 1989 and approached 30% in 1990 (Worlddata 2023).
8. It needs to be added that it would not be so surprising to find that the Nicaraguan government was not fully aware of Hungarian economic possibilities and constraints, as Hungarian citizens were not completely informed either. Most of them, for example, learnt about the overall amount of foreign debt only after the regime change (Romsics 1999, 520).
9. On the disorderly retreat of the socialist camp from Central America, see Yordanov (2021).

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